

This is the third draft of the chapter on Reading Hands in Hold'em Brain by King Yao. Please email feedback, suggestions, comments, opinions, questions to KingYao@HoldemBrain.com or you could use the Feedback Form to email me at the bottom of the page

Hold'em Brain: Reading Hands

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Reading a hand is the act of deducing the two hole cards that your opponents may hold based on the board cards, their previous actions in the hand and their previous actions in previous hands. The skill of reading hands is difficult to learn without experience at the poker table but experience alone will not do the trick. With experience, a player will be exposed to different situations and be more comfortable analyzing them since he has seen it before. But the player must think about each situation and know what is relevant. This chapter will help any player to identify what they need to focus on when trying to read an opponent's hand.

In Hold'em the last card is dealt face up and is a community card, just like the other four cards on the board. Players can know with certainty whether or not there is a flush possibility, a straight possibility or a full house possibility. Without three cards of the same suit on the board, no player can have a flush. Without three different cards within five cards of each other, there can be no straight. Without a pair on the board, there can be no full house or four-of-a-kind possible. This means hands will have a relative value based on the board. Although a royal flush is the best possible poker hand, in Hold'em it is usually not possible for a royal flush to exist since there needs to be at least three cards to the royal flush on the board for any player to have a royal flush. A three-of-a-kind could be the best hand depending on the board. Other times a three-of-a-kind is not a playable hand if there are other possibilities on the board and other players are playing strongly.

Reading Flushes and Flush Draws

By the River, it is easy to see if a flush is possible. If there are three cards of the same suit on the board, then any player would need both of his hole cards to be of the same suit to make a flush. If there are four cards of the same suit on the board, then any player would have a flush with just one card of that suit. If all five cards on the board are of the same suit, then all players have a flush, it is just a matter of how high their flush is depending on whether or not they held a card of the same suit in their hand.

If a player's starting cards are of the same suit, he has three ways of making a flush. The first way is for all three cards on the Flop to be of the same suit as the player's two hole cards. The player would have a flush right on the Flop. The second way is for two cards on the Flop to be of the same suit as the player's two hole cards, but then he needs a third card of the same suit to come on the board on either the Turn or the River. The third way is for only one card on the Flop to be of the same suit as the player's two hole cards, but then he needs both the Turn card and the River card to be of that same suit as well. The second way is the most common way.

If your cards are suited, how often will you flop a flush? How often will you flop a flush draw with two cards of the same suit on the Flop? Here is a table with the percentage of times you will see 3, 2, 1 and 0 cards of the same suit as your two suited hole cards.

Number of cards that will come on the Flop that are the same suit as your hole cards	Computation	Percentage of time it will happen
3	$11/50 \times 10/49 \times 9/48$	0.8%
2	$11/50 \times 10/49 \times 39/48 \times 3$	10.9%
1	$11/50 \times 39/49 \times 38/48 \times 3$	41.6%
0	$39/50 \times 38/49 \times 37/48$	46.6%
Total		100%

* the percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding error

It is very rare to hit a flush right on the Flop, it happens less than 1% of the time. However this does not mean that if all three cards on the board are of the same suit, that less than 1% of the time someone has a flush. In fact, when all three cards on the Flop are of the same suit, any random hand would have a 3.8% ($10/49 \times 9/48$) chance of having a flush. These numbers may seem contradictory, but they are not. In the first scenario, we start off knowing two of our cards are of the same suit, and we need all three cards on the Flop to be of the same suit. In the second scenario, we start off knowing that the Flop is all of the same suit. Then we need to calculate the chances that the two cards in any one hand are of that same suit. It is the difference in the starting point. In the first situation, we know two cards and we need three more. In the second situation, we know three cards and we only need two more.

If you flop a flush draw with two cards of the same suit as your two hole cards, how often will you make the Flush on the Turn, the River or neither?

When will you make your flush if you have four cards to a flush on the Flop?	Computation	Percentage
Turn	$9/47$	19.1%
River	$38/47 \times 9/46$	15.8%
Total	$9/47 + (38/47 \times 9/46)$	35.0%
Never	$38/47 \times 37/46$	65.0%

* the percentages on the Turn and River do not add up to the Total percentage due to rounding error

The reason why there is a significantly lower percentage of hitting the flush on the River than the Turn is that there is a chance that you hit the flush on the Turn and hit a sixth card of the same suit on the River. But in that situation, you already have the flush, so getting another flush card on the River is meaningless. If the Turn card does not make your flush, then there is a 19.6% chance that

you will get the flush on the River (9/46). These percentages are interesting, but you will not need them if you use DIPO (see the chapter on Pot Odds) when you are on a draw and you read hands well.

The most common way a player will make a flush occurs when he has two cards of the same suit in his hand and two cards of that suit comes on the Flop. Then the player can get his flush on either the Turn or the River by hitting a fifth card of his suit. Many players like to play suited cards for this reason. Having suited cards is useful because it adds another way of winning a hand, but it is often overrated by many players who are willing to play any suited cards, no matter the rank or the ability to make a straight with the two cards.

If a player makes a raise in late position when there are two cards to a flush on board, it could signify he is on a flush draw and is raising to try to get a free card on the Turn. If an opponent makes this play when you are in early position, you may want to think about betting on the Turn if you think your made hand is good at the moment. The free card raise is a useful strategy, as is the counter strategy of betting into the raiser if a flush card does not come. This is discussed in greater detail in the Free Cards chapter. If there are two or more players in the hand, a raise by a nut flush draw has value even on that round by itself. In the chart above, it shows there is a total of 34.9% chance that a player will catch a flush if he has four to a flush on the Flop. If there are two or more players in, then the player on the nut flush draw is getting 2:1 odds (equivalent to 33%) when he bets and raises. It is important to note the nut flush draw aspect since other players maybe on flush draws themselves. It would be a travesty to catch a flush draw only to be beaten by a higher flush.

Another way for player to make a flush is when he starts with two suited cards, flops one card of the same suit as his hole cards, and then catch a runner-runner flush. A runner-runner flush means catching a card of the same suit on both the Turn and the River. Typically catching a flush this way comes almost by accident. The player would not be correct to draw to the runner-runner flush unless he had something else going for him, such as a split pair on the Flop. It would not be until the Turn that a player who catches a flush should use it as a primary reason to stay in the hand.

If you flop a runner-runner flush draw, how often will you have a four flush on the Turn and how often will you actually make it on the River?

Runner-runner flush draw possibilities, assuming the two hole cards are of the same suit	Computation	Percentage
Pick up a flush draw on the Turn (the Turn makes two cards of the same suit on the board along with your two hole cards are of that same suit)	10/47	21.3%
No flush draw on the Turn	37/47	78.7%
Catch the flush on the River (both the Turn and the River are of the same suit, thus giving three cards of the same suit on the board, along with your two hole cards that are of the same suit)	10/47 x 9/46	4.2%
Pick up a flush draw on the Turn but do not catch the flush		

on the River (the Turn makes two cards of the same suit on the board along with your two hole cards of the same suit, but the River does not make the flush)	10/47 x 37/46	17.1%
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In the case where there are four cards of the same suit on the board, it becomes much easier for any player to have a flush. In fact, any player with the A of that suit when there are three cards of the same suit on the Flop or Turn, will likely have enough pot odds to see the hand to the River to see if he makes the nut flush. The player(s) with the K or the Q of that suit needs to be aware that they are not drawing to the nut flush.

By the River, if there are not three cards of the same suit on the board and if you think your opponent was on a flush draw, you will not need to worry about a flush. This may allow you to bluff if your opponent indeed had a flush draw while you do not have much of a hand yourself.

Reading Straights and Straight Draws

Straights are a lot tougher to read than flushes and it can be more difficult to determine if someone has received the card he needs to make his straight. After the River card is on the board, it is simple to determine when a flush is possible. If there are three or more cards of the same suit on the board, then there is always the chance that someone may have a flush. With straights, it is a lot more difficult because it is not nearly as obvious when someone has filled up on their straight draw as opposed to when someone has filled up on their flush draw. A large percentage of boards will have straight possibilities, especially those that do not contain a pair. As with flush draws, it is important to determine the possibility of a player going for a straight by seeing the sequence of the board. Since straights are tougher to read than flushes, this is a little bit more tricky with reading straight draws.

Board #1
Flop : K-J-5 rainbow Turn : 9 River : 7

With Board #1, there are three different two-card combinations that could make a straight. They are: QT, T8, 86.

This does not mean that these two card holdings are equally likely to be held by any player. Of course, all those two card holdings are just as likely to be initially dealt to any player, but since most players will not view those three combinations as equal in value, it means they will more likely play one hand than another. The hand players will play most out of those three hands is QT, since it is a hand that consists of two relatively high cards, many players are willing to play this hand, especially if it is suited. Some players are more selective and will only play it only in certain situations, other players are not very selective and will play QT in any position. Those same players who are not very selective may also play T8 and 86 as well, but not as often as they will

with QT. Even terrible players would understand that high cards are better than lower cards.

It is also important to note the texture and sequence of the board. Even if someone did play T8 and 86 and saw the Flop, it would be the rare player and/or the rare situation that allowed him to continue with the hand and see the Turn. On the Turn he would pick up either an open-ended straight draw (with T8) or an inside straight draw (with 86), and would have more reason to continue to the River. With a Flop like K-J-5, anyone holding QT would likely play the hand out to see the River, but those holding T8 and 86 would have to find a special reason to stay in the hand, and thus would not be in the hand to see their straight completed on the River.

If we change the sequence of the board cards, we can see how those three hands would be played differently.

Board #2
Flop : K-9-7 rainbow Turn : J River: 5

With a flop of K-9-7, both T8 and 86 would have an open-ended straight draw. Players holding these hands will continue with the hand until the River, and probably rightfully so since they will have eight outs to make their straight. If flush cards or the board pairs up and there is strength in betting, it may change the odds a bit, but that would not concern most players. QT would also likely stay in on the Flop as well since QT holds an inside straight draw. A hand like QT can be bullied out of the hand more easily than T8 and 86 since the holder of QT quickly recognizes they only have the four J's to make the straight, whereas the holders of T8 and 86 each have a total of eight cards that can make their straight, twice as many chances as QT. So if there are two bets to the holder of QT, the pot odds may dictate a fold to be in order, even though there is a chance to hit the nut hand. Not everyone will fold this hand of course, but the better players will fold it if the bet size relative to the expected pot size does not hold value.

The key idea to note between the two boards is the sequence of the arrival of the cards. When the board develops in the fashion of Board #2, there are a greater variety of straights that someone could turn over on the showdown than in Board #1, even though the board cards are identical after the river. With Board #2, even with three K's, you cannot be too comfortable given the development of the board. After the Turn or River, you may have to back off and just call if the other player(s) gets aggressive.

Here is another board sequence. The five cards on the board are the same as in Boards #1 & #2, but the sequence is changed again.

Board #3
Flop : J-7-5 rainbow Turn : K

River : 9

Now it would be much more surprising to see someone turn over QT on the showdown. On this Flop, there is not nearly as many reasons for a holder of QT to stay in the hand compared to the previous two Flops. It is still possible of course, depending on the player, the betting on the Flop, and how the other players play. Once the holder of QT does get to see the Turn, he will usually see it to the River since he now has eight outs to make the nut straight. As in most cases, there are exceptions. If there is already a flush possibility out on the Turn, there is lots of betting on the Turn and the holder of QT understands that even if he fills up his straight he may lose to a flush, then maybe the holder of QT will fold. With Board #3, if you hold a set of K's against a solid player who was not playing out of the blinds, then you can be sure you have him beat.

One needs to be aware of the texture of the Flop, to see what possible straight cards could fill up someone's straight draw. This does not mean that when one of these cards hits, that you should slow down and hit the brakes. Flops with two relatively high cards could easily have someone chasing the straight draw, because players will play high cards more often, from all positions. Sometimes the texture of the hand and the sequence of the board will tell you whether you need to be concerned about a possible straight, and when you don't need to be concerned at all. Here are two examples, one showing you need not fear a straight, the other showing that you need to be aware of the possibility of a straight.

Example 1: No need to fear a straight

You hold KK in middle position and raise. A solid player in the cutoff seat re-raises you, making it three bets. The big blind, an average player, calls the two bets. You decide to simply call and see the Flop.

Flop: K-5-7 rainbow

The big blind checks, as do you. The solid player bets, the big blind folds and you decide to check-raise. The solid player calls

Turn: 9

You bet out and the solid player calls.

River: J

There are no flush possibilities. You bet out again, and now the solid player raises. What should you do? Given the sequence of betting, it should be obvious that you have the best hand. The only hand that can beat your top set of three K's is a straight. A player with 86 would have flopped a straight draw and T8 and QT would have turned a straight draw. However, knowing the solid player as you do, you realize it would be very unusual for him to three bet you pre-Flop with 86, so you can safely rule that hand out. It would also have been unlikely for him to three bet pre-Flop with either T8 or QT as well, but even more unlikely would be the pre-Flop raises combined with calling your check-raise on the flop when the chances of a straight are low, and his cards are not overcards to the board. So it is safe to rule out his hand as T8 or QT.

It should be obvious then that the most likely hand that he has is JJ, with an outside chance of 99 or AA. With JJ, he is worried that you have a K in your hand to make a pair of K's (there is a K on the board). With 99, maybe he was just waiting to spring the surprise on you on the river rather than on the turn. Since you have top set, you should be very comfortable knowing you have the best hand and re-raise the solid player. There is no need to worry about a straight beating your set in this example.

Now let's take a look at the same type of hand, but with a different sequence of cards.

Example 2: Possibly up against a straight

You hold KK in middle position and raise. A solid player in the cutoff seat re-raises you, making it three bets. An average player in the big blind calls the two bets. You decide to simply call and see the Flop.

Flop: K-J-5 rainbow

The big blind checks, as do you. The solid player bets, the big blind calls and you decide to check-raise. Both players call your raise. (The difference between Example 1 and Example 2 up to this point is that the big blind has called the Flop bet and raise.)

Turn: 7

The big blind checks, you bet and both the solid player and the big blind calls your bet.

River: 9

There are no flush possibilities. The average player in the big blind checks, you bet out again. The solid player folds, but now the big blind check-raises. What should you think and do?

Given the sequence of betting, you need to consider the possibility that the big blind has hit a straight with QT in his hand. It is safe to rule out T8 and 86. Even if the big blind found the courage to call two bets pre-Flop with either of those hands, it would be very unlikely for him to continue with the hand on the Flop when he does not have anything resembling a decent hand. It is possible that he has a hand that your trip K's can beat. He could have a set of 5's and waited until the very end to raise, hoping you had AK. He could have two pair such as K9, hitting his two pair on the River and thinking that he can beat you now. All of those hands you can beat, the only hand you cannot beat is QT, which is the nut hand. The option to re-raise at this point depends on exactly how comfortable you feel about how the big blind played his hand and on your opinion about his actions. It also depends on a pre-planned attack on what to do if he raises you again. It may actually be a very good re-raise since the big blind could easily have gone for a check raise with a lower set or hitting two pair on the river, but it is also important to keep the straight possibility in mind.

The difference between these two hands is the sequence of cards that hits the board. In the first sequence, the big blind would not even have been in the hand past the flop with a hand like QT.

In the second sequence, it is obvious that he should be playing it until the river once he sees the Flop. In the hand in Example 1, you can be very confident of having the better hand. In the hand in Example 2, you are less sure.

Dangerous Flops for Straight Draws

Not all straight draws are built alike. Most players are more willing to play cards that are connected without any gaps, such as QJ, JT, T9, more so than they would be willing to play cards with one gap, such as QT, J9. Here are some Flops that are dangerous because with these Flops, there would be a higher chance of a player holding a straight draw. Keep in mind that not only could players flop straight draws with these Flops, they could also flop two pair since the Flop contains two relatively high cards that are connected with no gaps, the type that does best for straight draw possibilities.

Flop	Two card combinations that allow for straight draws
K-Q-x	AJ, AT, JT, J9, T9 (total of 5 possible hands)
Q-J-x	AK, AT, KT, K9, T9, T8, 98 (total of 7 possible hands)
J-T-x	AK, AQ, KQ, K9, Q9, 98, 97, 87 (total of 8 possible hands)
T-9-x	KQ, KJ, QJ, Q8, J8, 87, 86, 76 (total of 8 possible hands)

In comparing a Flop like J-T-x versus a Flop like T-9-x, you can see that both Flops have the same number of two card hands that may have straight possibilities. However, it is important to note the hands that correspond to J-T-x are hands that more players would play than the hands that correspond to T-9-x. This is simply because the hands that correspond to J-T-x have higher cards than the hands that correspond to T-9-x.

Playing a Pair of Aces versus a possible straight draw

Consider these two flops/possible starting hand combinations

Flop	Starting hands that have a straight draw with this Flop
A-6-5	98, 97, 87, 74, 43, 42, 32
A-9-8	QJ, QT, JT, T7, 76, 75, 65

Which Flop will allow more players to continue with a straight draw? If we assume every player always sees every flop, then of course it would be equal. Both Flops have the same amount of possible two card combinations that would make a straight draw. However, the hands that would have a straight draw when the Flop is A-9-8 are hands that will be played more often by all players. For example, JT will be played more often than 87, and 76 will be more playable than 43. If you have a hand such as AK, you would need to be more aware of the straight potentials on a flop of A-9-8 compared to a flop of A-6-5. It would be important to determine the position of the players

that are left in the hand after the Flop. If the opponent(s) is in late position and had called your middle position raise, he would have a much better chance of having a straight draw with a Flop of A-9-8 than A-6-5 (possibly with a hand like JT or QJ). While the blinds may still have a higher chance of having a straight draw with a Flop of A-9-8 than A-6-5, the blinds would be more likely to have a straight draw than a late position caller of a raise when the Flop is A-6-5.

Double Inside Straight Draws

There are a few types of hand/flop combinations that are a bit confusing to the novice player. These hands allow for two different ranks of cards filling up a straight draw. However, they are not open-ended straight draws, as that term is typically reserved for straight draws where you already have four consecutive cards and need one higher or one lower to complete the straight. An example would be having JT in your hand with 9-8-x on the board. Double inside straight draws also have two possible cards that could fill up the straight, but they are a little bit more difficult for the novice to identify. In order to have a double inside straight draw, three cards on the board will have to work for you in that regards. Here is an example:

Your hand: J9o

Flop: K-T-7 rainbow

Both a Q or an 8 on the Turn or River would give you the straight. The most common thought upon reading this Flop when it comes to possible straight draws is someone holding QJ (an open-ended straight draw) or AQ / AJ (inside straight draws). The double inside straight draw is more deceptive. Double inside straight draws are sometimes confusing even to the holder of the hand. Take a look at all the possible double inside straight draw hand/Flop combinations to familiarize yourself with these types of hands so you don't surprise yourself at the table. A list is shown in the next section.

Double Inside Straight Draw Hand/Flop Combinations

I do not recommend memorizing these hand/flop combinations. That is not the reason why they are listed. There are just too many situations in Limit Hold'em, and to memorize everything would defeat the purpose. What is important is that you get in the habit of recognizing these types of hands and Flops so that when you do encounter them in a game, you do not have to start from scratch. Preparation is a huge key to winning Hold'em, and this is one of the situations that calls for it.

Both inside straight cards make you the nut straight

Hand	Flop	Card that fills the straight
QJ	A-T-8	K (nut) / 9 (nut)
QT	A-J-8	K (nut) / 9 (nut)

One gap hands.

When you have two hole cards with one gap in between them, only the low inside straight card

makes you the nut straight. The higher card gives you a straight but gives another possible hand the nut straight.

Hand	Flop	Higher inside straight: Card that fills the non-nut straight (with the hand that would have the nut straight)	Lower inside straight: Card that fills the nut straight
J9	K-T-7	Q (AJ is nut hand)	8
T8	Q-9-6	J (KT)	7
97	J-8-5	T (Q9)	6
86	T-7-4	9 (J8)	5
75	9-6-3	8 (T7)	4
64	8-5-2	7 (96)	3
53	7-4-A	6 (85)	2

Connector Hands

Hands that can flop a double inside straight draw with two different flops

Hand	Flop 1	Cards that make the nut straight with Flop 1	Flop 2	Cards that make the straight with Flop 2
JT	K-9-7	Q, 8	A-Q-8	K, 9 - both makes the nuts
T9	Q-8-6	J, 7	K-J-7	Q (AT is nut), 8 (nut)
98	J-7-5	T, 6	Q-T-6	J (AK is nut), 7 (nut)
87	T-6-4	9, 5	J-9-5	T (KQ is nut, Q8 is also higher), 6 (nut)
76	9-5-3	8, 4	T-8-4	9 (QJ is nut, J7 is also higher), 5 (nut)
65	8-4-2	7, 3	9-7-3	8 (JT is nut, T6 is also higher), 4 (nut)
54	7-3-A	6, 2	8-6-2	7 (T9 is nut, 95 is also higher), 3 (nut)

These double inside straight draws are even more confusing for other players to read your hand. With a hand like J9 and a Flop of K-T-7, it allows you to raise and bet aggressively since you have 8 different outs, similar to holding an open-ended straight draw such as 98 and QJ. This means raising on the flop for a free card on the turn is a strategy to consider. This strategy can be useful against players who understand what it means to raise for a free card. These opponents may be looking hard for the A or 9 (since it would fill an open-ended straight draw for anyone that held QJ) if they thought your raise on the flop signified an attempt at getting a free card on the turn. If a Q or 8 hits on the Turn, they are much less aware that the card could make you a straight. The

reason is that it is much easier for him to identify the straight draw by putting you on QJ (or even on 98), since that gives a more visible KQJT (T987) straight draw. Understanding that a J9 gives one a double inside straight draw with as much chance of catching the straight as having QJ is tough for the mind to see by just looking at the Flop. It is possible that a Q would be a danger sign for them, since AJ is a hand that is typically playable, but that would mean your free card raise on the flop was for a gutshot and an overcard (the A), which is a rarer move since there are probably only seven outs (3 A's are overcards to the board and 4 Q's for the straight), and possibly fewer if the opponent has a hand like AK, AT. The Q is a little deceptive as far as the straight is concerned, but the 8 is even more deceptive, as it is very difficult to identify that as a card that fills up a straight.

The deceptive nature of these types of hands begs for the holder of these hands to use them to their advantage. These situations allow one to bluff if an A or 9 hits the board against the better players that may think you were raising on the flop to get a free card for your straight draw on the turn. In fact that very well may have been your strategy, but you were looking for other cards to fill you up. The A and the 9 simply allows you to put more pressure against your opponents. Note that the A and 9 would not be a useful card to bluff against a player that is a calling station, who will call you down anyway and won't even think about folding. Unlike the better players, the calling station would not be concerned that you may have caught your straight draw. He is concerned about his hand only. This should show the importance of understanding how to read the board, as well as the importance of knowing your opponents well enough that you understand how well they can read the board.

Also note that if there are two cards of the same suit on the Flop, then other players may put you on a flush draw rather than a straight draw. This is because your raise on the Flop will look like a raise for a free card. This can work for you in a couple of ways, as it does when you have an open ended straight draw and raised for a free card. Many opponents have an easier time of putting you on a flush draw when you are in the position of possibly raising for a free card. This means the better opponents may be inclined to fold if they do see a third flush card hit the board, since they may have put you on the flush draw due to your free card raise. It also may allow your opponents to pay you off when you do hit the straight while no third flush card hits the board. They may think you have missed your flush, and call your bet, without knowing that you actually did catch the card you were looking for. Not only is this thought process important to understand when you have an open ended straight draw, it applies the same way when you have a double inside straight draw.

With a double inside straight draw with two cards of the same suit on the flop, keep in mind that you have 8 cards that actually help you (to actually make your straight), another 8 cards that are straight scare cards, and another 7 cards that are scare flush cards (there are 11 flush cards, but 4 of them have already been counted as the possible straight cards). In a hand like that, of the 47 unknown cards, 23 of them will either make your hand or put a little fear into your opponent. That is almost half of the cards that are possible, and you have both the turn and river to try to hit it. It is a situation like this which makes it important to have an understanding of how your opponent thinks. The weaker opponents may be scared off by the scare cards and the way you have bet, but for the ones who are willing to call you down to the showdown or who are simply less perceptive, the scare cards will not affect them.

Reading a danger card on the Turn

You are in the big blind with AT. A decent player raises in the cutoff seat and you call.

Flop: T-9-3 rainbow

You decide to check-raise. You get re-raised and you call. You think there is a chance the opponent is on a draw, with a hand like QJ or KQ. He could also have a higher pocket pair with AA, KK, QQ or JJ. He could have a pair of T like you, but with a weaker kicker such as QT or JT. He could have a set of T's or 9's or two pair with T9. Other hands that he could have that would be a nice draw for him are J8 and 87, both open ended straight draws. In a case like this, you could be ahead or you could be behind, it would be correct to keep playing with your top pair, top kicker.

In a case like this, it is useful to know what the most dangerous card can be on the Turn. In this case, the Q or J is the most dangerous card. Even if you were actually ahead on the Flop, a Q or J can easily put you in the position where you need to get lucky on the River to win the hand. If your opponent raised for a free card, he will have either hit the straight or hit a higher pair than your pair of T's. Even if he did not hit two pair or a straight, he could have picked up a straight draw, thus adding 8 outs to his hand. If the Q or J did not help your opponent, it is likely that he was either ahead already or completely bluffing on the Flop.

Reading a danger card on the River

You are on the button with AJ. You decide to re-raise the cutoff's open-raise. The two of you see the Flop heads-up for 2.75 big bets as both blinds folded.

Flop: A-9-6 rainbow

He checks, you bet and he calls.

Turn: 8

He checks, you bet and he calls.

River: 7

He checks, what should you do? The decision to bet or check depends on what you think he will do with a big pocket pair such as KK, QQ, JJ. If he will not call with those hands, then you should consider checking. If he will call, then you can bet with more confidence. Since he raised pre-Flop and had no problems calling you down, there is a good chance he has an A. With a board like this, most hands with an A can beat you. Those with higher kickers are AK, AQ. Those that can make a straight with this board are AT and A5. Those that can make two pair with this board are A9, A8, A7 and A6. The only hands with an A that you can beat are A4, A3 & A2, against AJ, you would split the pot. So AJ in this case would be a vulnerable hand against a player with an A.

Reading a player based on his thoughts instead of your own

Different poker players will play the same hands in different ways. A tight player may fold AQo

to an early position raiser if it came from a good player. An aggressive player may re-raise with the same hand, while an average player may just call. This is a situation where three different players would take a different action with the same exact hand in the same exact situation. Since players will act differently, it is important to try to think what your opponents are thinking when you try to read their hand and evaluate their holdings rather than put yourself in their shoes. You may play the hand completely differently than they do if you were in their place, in which case if you put yourself in their shoes, you may completely misread the situation since they may not have played the hand the same way you would have.

In his book *Psychology of Poker*, Alan Schoonmaker calls this Subjective Rationality and Egoistic Fallacy (page 48-50). Subjective Rationality is the idea that even if we think the other player is making an irrational play, the play is rational to them. When we impose our set of rational thinking on other players, it looks like they are crazy, but when we try to think like them, we see the rationality behind their play. Egoistic Fallacy is a way to describe players trying to read their opponents' hands based on how they would play the hand themselves. For example they may raise only with the best hands, so when they see another player raise, they assume the other player would raise only with the best hands as well. Players will project their own poker styles on their opponents when they are thinking about what their opponents are doing. Instead, players should be thinking about what their opponents are thinking instead of what they would do themselves in the same situation. Schoonmaker says these two concepts are closely related, and I think it is an interesting way to think about reading hands, in the sense that we want to try to think about what the other player is thinking and why he is doing what he is doing. We want to get into their heads and see why a certain play is rational to him. When we can do that, we will have a much easier time reading and evaluating his probable hands instead of projecting ourselves and our own rationale and principles on them.

Reading skills in Low Limit games

There are some players who play very poorly and are unreadable. This means that it is impossible to figure out what they have since they are likely playing with any two cards and calling bets on the Flop in the hopes they get a miracle card on the Turn. The low limit games have a higher percentage of these type of players than the middle limit or high limit games, although they may exist in any game. The advantages of having these types of players in your game far outweigh the disadvantages of the difficult time that you may have in reading their hand. What is important is that you do not read them incorrectly. It is difficult to read the hand of a player who sees every Flop, since he could have any two cards in his hand. Of course his actions such as betting or raising may help you narrow down his holdings somewhat, his expected holdings are still going to be a wider variety than other players who are not playing every hand.

Counter-Intuition

Most people start to play games like Draw Poker before they play Hold'em. In those games, each player's hand is distinct from other players' hands, so every player would always want the higher ranking hand over a lower one. But in games where there are community cards, that is not always the case. Here are some situations where players would rather have a lower ranking hand over a higher ranking hand since the lower ranking hand it is more likely to be the winning hand.

When would you rather have a Straight than a Flush?

A flush is a higher ranking hand than a straight, but it is not always preferable to have a flush than a straight. This occurs when you already have a nut straight, but also have a draw to a non-nut flush. You would rather have the lower ranking hand that is a nut hand rather than a higher ranking hand that is not the nut hand. This can also occur when you have both a straight draw and a flush draw, where the straight draw is a draw to the nuts, while the flush draw is not.

Examples:

1. You hold 9♣8♣, the Board is T♣-7♦-2♣-6♠. Currently you have the nut straight. If a club hits the river, the ranking of your hand improves from a straight to a flush, but then you no longer have the nut hand as you could lose to a higher flush.

2. You hold 9♣8♣, the Board is T♣-7♦-2♣-2♠. You have both a straight draw and a flush draw. You would prefer to hit a J or a 6 for the nut straight rather than a club for a non-nut flush. Either hand could lose to a full house, but at least with a straight, it would be the highest possible non-full house hand.

When is Trips better than a Full House?

There are certain situations where you may be happier to have three-of-a-kind than a full house. The reason is because sometimes your opponents actually have more outs when you have a full house than when you have trips. It does not matter how badly you beat him by, just as long as your cards really are better, be it by an inch or by a mile.

Example:

Your opponent has AK. The board is T-T-9-K

Which hand would you rather have?

(a) 99

(b) T8

With hand (a), you have a full house. 999TT is your hand. With hand (b), you only have three-of-a-kind, TTTK9 is your hand, and you are only using one of your cards, as the 8 does not play. In both cases you are ahead of your opponent. What is important here is not the fact that a full house is a higher ranking hand than a three-of-a-kind, what is important here is what the chances are that your opponent can come back and beat you on the River.

With hand (a), your opponent can catch a K or a T to beat you. If he catches a T, he has a full house of TTTKK, while your full house of TTT99 is second best. It is a strange hand because you actually have two full houses, TTT99 and TT999, but alas, that does not help. There are two K's left in the deck and two T's left in the deck. So your opponents has four outs.

With hand (b), your opponent can catch a K to beat you, but not a T. A T would give you four-of-a-kind which would allow you to beat his full house. If he catches a K, then you will both make a full house on the River, but his full house will be higher. There are two K's left in the deck, so he only has two outs.

Any player would rather have only two cards left in the deck to beat him than four cards. So in this

case, you would actually prefer hand (b), three-of-a-kind over hand (a), a full house, because you have a greater chance of winning after the River card comes. These two hands shows that not everything is cut and dry. You must be able to think in terms of outs and your chances of winning the hand, as opposed to the actual ranking of your hand.

When is QJ better than AK?

AK is a better starting hand than QJ, that is obvious to everyone including the worst players. But there are some situations after the Flop with no pair when these cards are equal in value and QJ may even be a better hand.

For example, you raise in mid to late position. Only the big blind calls, the big blind is an average player who will do his fair share of blind defending, but not with trash hands.

Flop: 7-5-2

You bet and you get check-raised. It is possible he could have a pair with a 7 or a 5 in his hand, or he could be check-raising with a straight draw such as 86 or 98 if he has a little bit of imagination. In any of those cases, having QJ is just as good as having AK. But when he has a hand such as A7 or A5, the QJ will have a higher chance of winning since it still has 6 outs while the AK only has 3 outs since hitting a pair of A's would make two pair for the opponent. Players are more likely to defend their blind with a hand like A7 or A5 than they would with a hand like Q7, Q5. Since the K is higher than the Q and J, if the player is a bit looser, he will be more likely to defend with K7, K5 than he would with Q7, Q5, J7, J5. So in a case like this, it is important to be aware that the AK may be a weaker hand to have than QJ given the Flop and the circumstances.